

RUTHANN ROBSON

Genealogy

Almost better to be an orphan

than to be a woman holding sea-rotted
twigs and looking for ancestors;
clutching a driftwood divining rod that
will never discover a grand matriarch or
patron of the arts. My mothers had to work.

I come from a family of women with double
first names and dubious
surnames, of half sisters with half-told
stories, of women who would use their family
trees when firewood is scarce.

We have no leather bibles to edify
our descendants. In fact, the custom
among us has been to burn birth
certificates, to change names like
clothes stolen from someone else,

to hide from husbands and bad debts.
We moved across oceans and mountains and
never learned how to write a letter home.
You could say I have no history.
Of course, I could send twenty dollars

somewhere for a picture of my family
crest, complete with instructions in genealogy.
The rich spent years writing history
and now they need the cash. But what
could they tell me? But what would I find?

A white woman caring for her daughter dying
of childbed fever, and a hillbilly quilting
while coughing with black lung, and a chinese

woman ironing white boys' shorts, and a black
woman rolling other women's hair on Saturdays

and cigars during the week, and a woman not speaking
the language while she sewed in the cold
garment factory. A woman waitressing in Birmingham
and whoring in New Orleans and imprisoned
in Sydney. A blind woman selling newspapers and

a woman with one leg who wanted to love other women
but was afraid and a woman whose family changed
their names in disgrace and moved away, looking
for work where no one knew their debts and crimes.

These women are the salt
of my sea, the sweat that collects
on the rims of my scars. I do not need
to know their names, their places
of birth, their dates of death,

to know I am their daughter.

waves, night

1.
the moon looks full, but it's waning
your mother
wails that she's tired of life
at this edge her same complaints
salted over years
irregular as tides out &
farther out you are bloated
& have abandoned your attempts
to rescue her or any other woman
including yourself

2.
we make our own traps, certainly
but what did you expect? you were born
with the moon in cancer born under
a steel pier your first toys
were the sharp & pliable wires
of crabtraps you artfully constructed
your own prison silly now
to say what you intended: *i thought*
i was building a barricade a home

3.
Georgia O'Keeffe had no children
now she is famous
for Elizabeth Arden flowers gigantic
in their femininity famous also
for skulls & bones of bleached white masks
raped from the desert gleaming fertile
in unmitigated sun not-so-famous
for her oiled testament to her brief affair
with the midnight Atlantic deep blue slants
& a pinpoint house of incandescence

4.
the not-yet-ripe peaches color
of shore light
five seconds before dusk the suntan oil
color of beach foam when there's a frantic storm
miles out at sea the color you are tempted

to call yellow the color of a single
fleck in the marine blue iris
of your mother's left eye
when she is angered dangerous as broken coral
& as useless

5.
remember that woman writer, British
(something about a lighthouse)
(about a room) the woman who walked
into a cold spring river rock in her pocket
(something about death being the only experience
she would never write about) madness comes
not like a tidal wave but like eddies
on a sandbar the water is shallow & warm
harboring pieces of claws & eggs frail as air bubbles
she had no children either

6.
your mother bays like a sea wolf
a mythical siren a self-appointed
sisyphus the waves crash her flesh
with dark rhythms rimmed in foam
leaving patterns of white like undecipherable runes
all round & content salt renders choice
& fate indistinguishable but the bait
is as shiny as ever submerged in its slowly
too slowly rusting cage of metal

the consort

1.
all romance is a parody of this:
child
& woman as Madonna/Goddess

the day you learned to kiss:
the souring smell of my breast
on your excited wet breath

your giggles like the bluest baubles
on a sapphire necklace

more precious than precious

2.
when i was engaged
i stole my mother's pearls
& hocked them
to pay for an abortion
for my lover's lover

then i eloped
alone
with you in my womb

& we gave birth
alone
in a room at the Desert Inn

3.
that winter night
the stars brightly gossiping
& the moon
a bastard itself
almost full & approving

the cord was cut
by a paring knife
no doctor stitched me shut

there are scars

not meant
to be completely healed

4.
no one needs to tell me
this is forbidden
:in bed together
sleeping through night after
cold night after hot night

our scent is so mingled
no animal could distinguish
between us

or would need to

5.
i know how
Mary believed herself a virgin
never have i been purer
less subjugated
more sensuous
sweet sweet Jesus

something bares its rubied teeth
& howls
in the desert

each winter

after the first chill sets like a splinted bone
& my hands seem webbed with paperish ice
you appear blonde as my breath

i remember the months we lived in our heatless
tenement & you crossed each day off
the kitchen calendar as if each midnight
were a splendid accomplishment

each dark morning after the witching
hour we warmed our hands & cracked ribs
with sugared tea lusting near the only window
for the sun my arm in a sling

your eyebrows stitched slants we pretended to read
a text on mythology stared at each other
two battered Persephones each waiting
for the other to reveal herself

as Demeter powerful mother who would rescue
us into a fruitful spring by August
your patience had faded you marked the book
at Antigone & froze time into a private

eternity the snap of your neck echoed
through the closets the calendar
fell from the unpainted wall
sweat chipped at the ridges of your forehead

each winter
when i consider my countless failures
first i count the failure of my warmth
to thaw your flesh my bones

ring the years like pagan trees
documenting survival as if endurance
of each cold season since your death
were a brutal success

Nightshade

“Une lesbienne qui ne réinvente pas la monde est
une lesbienne en voie de disparition”

–Nicole Brossard, *Lesbiennes d'écriture*

I.

i am going away a little each day

i don't necessarily feel bad about this.
facts, my mother taught me, are facts.
nothing more.

but the other women i know, the women i call friends, the lesbians
i called family until i learned not to,
accuse me: “you lack imagination,” they tell me.
sometimes they say it in French, a language beautiful
as a slap on a high cheekbone, reminding me
of all the things i could never do:
plié, tour jeté, arabesque,
order in a restaurant,
sound like i came from Manhattan instead of the Bronx.

i wonder what happens to clichés
in translation; things like “every woman is
a lesbian because she loved her mother first.”
i've always liked that one.
i never asked my mother what she thought about it.
i was one of those kids who kept her mouth shut.

i never told my mother that i loved her.
we were women who believed there were places words could not go.
though i loved her most, i think, the day she let me quit the ballet
lessons i hated so much they made my throat sore as silence.

II.

i am going away a little each day.
i am not lonely, although i get a bit bored, divorced
from the gossip.

so i start to make up stories: amusing, witty, meaningful;
my family–i mean, community–doing delightfully raucous deeds.
i laugh. when Margot asks me what is so funny,
i tell her a story about Glenda&Sammy&Gloria and their three-way
romancing under the nightshade while the cat watched.
she doesn't laugh.
she brings back Glenda&Sammy&Gloria for a confrontation
of epic proportions. i tell the same story,
“to their faces,” as they say, only
i change the cat to a snowy owl and make the nightshade a
bloodier purple.
no one laughs.
Margot shouts that i am a liar.
Sammy says i'm crazy.
Glenda&Gloria agree i need therapy, but i know
that even if i had the money to slink into someone's sliding scale,
i am impatient-able.
i have slept with every therapist in the state,
or if not her, then her lover,
or if not her lover, then i would tell her i had.

III.

i am going away a little each day.
someone sends my ex-lover to fetch me as if i am an empty pail of water.
Jackie–or so she was called when she was my lover,
 though now she insists on Jacqueline–
has always wanted to be a writer. Jacqueline,
even when she was known as Jackie, has always said she is a writer.
once i told her that to be a writer, one had to write
something. that's when she kicked me out. after
a mediation session, of course.

when we were together, she'd read Brossard in bed, first
in French, then in English translation, then in French again.
she called us lov(h)ers. i liked that.
i thought there was a world, as original as the wheel, invented
in that “H” so snug in its parentheses.
i never told her that my mother did not know what parentheses were;
that my mother saw them on a sign once, and became scared, as if
there was yet another letter, another signal, she could neither read nor
write.

i am one of those women who keeps her mouth shut, at least

about certain things. still, i thought that Jackie, if not Jacqueline,
might understand my stories. but these days
Jacqueline is re-re-reading Virginia Woolf and quoting
something about the sacrifice of truth being “abject treachery.”
Jacqueline also tells me that a story isn’t a story unless its written,
otherwise it’s a lie. “what about oral history?”
i ask her. “history,” she says, “is history. nothing more.”
she’s becoming as tight-lipped as the British.

i tell her i am going to take a trip.
i tell her i’m going somewhere, where i will get away
from both French and English. she buys me a calligraphy set
as a *bon voyage* present. she must think i’m going by boat.

IV.

i am going away a little more each day.
truth: Jackie/Jacqueline had said.
vérité: in French.
but it’s the wrong path, no matter which fork
i choose. i am interested in something different, less boring.
a fact is nothing more
than a fact, as my mother always said: she was a woman who never put
facts
in parentheses.

(but could i kill the trees to say something?) there was a paper in the kit
from Jackie; white as bladderwort, dead as timber.
i practiced Gothic lettering.
i changed the story: i told myself how my family
representative of patriarchy made me abandon the only thing i ever
loved
because girls should not be seen in leotards. i practiced
the lie of my love for Mme. Claudé, my ballet teacher.
i liked that one. i would never ask my father what he thought.

it was easy to rearrange the world once i started.
first, i moved the Bronx into Manhattan, confined it all
in the East Village. my mother was an artiste, didn’t you know?
she was a poet and a painter and a radical revolutionary who could
bake cookies
and braid my hair and read Flaubert all at the same time.

i was a dancer (not in the topless clubs
which supported me and my lov(h)er (not Jackie, or even Jacqueline)
the junkie) in the Royal Ballet.
my lover was a gorgeous choreographer. we were both
very political and went around changing people's lives for the better.
we had seven cats, all named for characters of Colette.

V.

i am going away a little more each day.
farther & further
and no longer caring that i can never remember the difference
between those two words. (is there one?)
my writing is getting smaller & smaller, not only because i'm
becoming
practiced in italics, but because i'm running out of paper.
the trees grow more alive each night.
living in the woods, romantic as the witch i've always wanted to be, but
without the vocabulary.
my mother never taught me the names of plants.
i call most things nightshade.
my mother taught me never to take food from strangers.
i name most things deadly.

i am hungry. i am thirsty as an empty pail of water. the days dance
shorter & shorter. in the winter sun, i recognize
rabbit bells (a memory from a walk with Margot
her: spouting off botany
me: telling of Glenda&Sammy&Gloria).
the dried pods pop like children's guns.

the seeds are small and shiny, accurate as obsidian.
i wonder what would happen if i eat this jewelry?
if i don't?

or i could gather bunches of them, go
to a Women's Craft Fair, and market them as lesbian rattles.
i could write "grown on sacred lesbian land" in well-rounded
calligraphy on vellum notecards.
i could make my fortune.

VI.

i am going away a little more each day.
no one knows where i am, or everyone does, but no one cares, which is
nearly
as good as being invisible.
if i can't be seen, i can't be shot.
i am one lesbian, living alone in the woods.
i am not one or the other of two lesbians, camping, when a crazed man
(as if all men aren't) (oh, father, forgive all words supported by
parentheses)
aimed his rifle and fired&fired&fired&fired&fired.
both women are shot.
one can't move & the other can.
one goes for help & the other stays.
one dies & the other doesn't.

the one walking, the one trying to hold her blood on the right side
of her flesh,
does she try to reinvent reality?
does she try to spin the world back to a safer moment:
when both women were walking & spotting a plant on the trail,

trying to identify nightshade?
does she feel like disappearing?
do her bones scream for her lov(h)er?
while back at the campsite, a woman, a lesbian, each breath
(like an "H" trapped in parentheses of blood) closer&
closer to the last one, closer&closer to that place
where words don't go.

(at the man's trial,
his defense is that his mother
was a lesbian.)

VII.

i am going away a little each day.

i am one lesbian, disappearing in the woods, trying to imagine
that those two women made love/slept/broke camp/and
are now safely home arguing
with sharp words about how one of them told a lie (oh, so tiny)
to the other one. i am trying to imagine which one suggests
mediation. the dead one or the not-dead one.

i want to reinvent, not the wheel, but those two women.
i want to tell them that Jacqueline is Jackie
and that her tongue licks me instead of slicing me.
i want to tell them my mother read Baudelaire.
i want to tell them i was born in Paris, *s'il vous plait*.

i want to tell them about translation: "*Une lesbienne
qui ne réinvente pas la monde est une lesbienne en voie de disparition*"
one woman translates literally: a lesbian who does not reinvent
the world.
one woman translates differently: a lesbian who does not reinvent the word.

i want to tell them that the hurricane that is coming is not
a hurricane, but a simple storm;
no, not even a storm, but a change in the weather;
not even a change, just something i will name: nightshade.

the winds of nightshade are strong.
the trees bend like parentheses.
the rains of nightshade are sharp.
the rabbit bells are pierced like spitting jewels.
this world—
this word—
i have not invented could kill me.
i must reinvent.
i must reinvent this roar which sounds like many men with many guns.
i must be a lesbian who will not disappear; unless it suits me;
i must be a woman who will speak only in my own language,
unless i find another.
i must be the girl who loved her mother first.
the boy who did. the boy who loved his mother, the lesbian.

my throat is smooth from screaming out "nightshade."

the world—
the word—
i have reinvented, spins beautiful as the first wheel making the wind gentle
as a mother's slap,
making the rain round as it fills the pail of water.
or so she wrote.

la lesbienne d'écriture.

authenticity

there were other things that could have been said
about distance and love

i never escaped entirely
i learned withdrawal
i never denied my history
i edited it

this morning i watched men mow grass in the graveyard
across from city university
no matter how crowded or intelligent,
there is always room for death
i wanted the mist to cling like halos to the mowers
instead of shackles around their ankles
unlockable because untouchable
i wanted my lover to rise like an archangel
bearing a beautiful parking space,
crowned with a garland of brilliant footnotes

there are other things i could have said
about death and my lover

i have killed myself twice now
and am qualified to lecture on the vagaries of survival
i have loved her too long now
not to keep quiet about the nuances of passion

this summer, i'm the only one i know
who isn't in therapy or suing her therapist
who isn't recovering from her mother's death
or incest
i want to live on a beach in New Zealand
with a sheepdog smelling of kiwi
two hundred miles from a library
i want these days to be a flashback, backlit
by a beautiful blonde sun
bleached, burnt and hazy as a cherub's hair

there were things i heard them say
about her and the city

she was supposed to be a mirror, a knife
she is neither
here was supposed to be a culture, a life
it isn't even close

this year, i'm taking my lover and leaving the city
this place where only nature is unnatural
this place that makes me worship any pink inch of light
i am the mirror, the knife
with my dull side always out
shininess and sharpness are dangerous here
and never adequate as self-defense
i am the fence with garbage stuck in my throat
too frozen to decompose
or too styrofoam

there are other things i cannot say
like who i am and who i'm not

i thought fiction was poetry
it is theory
i thought theory was a solution
it is practice

this lifetime, my excuse is postmodernism
my identity is nothing other than a sin
called essentialism
authenticity is worse than co-dependency
it's self-dependency, how ugly
we were alone
trapped in a gridlock
when we lost
our sense of humor, sold
our imaginings of each other for tenure

there are other things we still need to say
about the streets, about the academy, about

the distances between our love
of death and our love
of masks and our love
for each other and our love

Anne Brigman in the Doorway of her Studio c. 1908

Anne Brigman's photographs of female nudes in the landscape are intensely personal, symbolic expressions of her inner feelings and mystical fantasies. As such, these photographs have remained inaccessible to many . . .

–from a catalog of an exhibition

Here in the austere Sierras
Take off your clothes, the sturdy
boots and jeans – no – the shirt first
yes, you are magnificent, don't worry
now climb that outcrop of granite
turn your face toward the glitter
caress the gnomonic cypress, your lover
you are the rhythm of trees and rocks
and i am all power and abandon
wielding that despised and desperate weapon
a camera

Here in the Dungeness darkroom
The deep erotic bottom of being alone
diluvial and demanding
nudes swim to the surface
happy to sacrifice their aquiline features
to be blurred into angels and archetypes
the etching tool my incessant ally
attending to my incantations
as i alter the interpositives
hour after night after season after year after
time stops

Here in the doorway caught by some other hunter
The threshold is always a pagan place
straddling the sanctum of the mystical
and the paddocks of paradises lost and found
every obverse is reverse as the lens has taught us
what can a photograph of a photographer reveal?
that light lurks in the flesh?
that desire is the mirror embodied?
you wanted to know if i loved women

(a dyke!), but my only secret was my lust for life
at the aperture.

White and Black Photography

The man at Ashmore's always asks me
whether I'm White or Black. I never answer.
I'm here only to buy my mother's dream book.
If you dream of Indians, the number 42.
If you dream of death, the number 9.
When my mother wins the lottery, she will buy
herself that fine white house on the corner;
the one with the triple windows and black shutters
that open and close. The neighbors will joke
about my professional quality tripod, calling it an old woman
with a cane or a young man with a hard-on.
I will laugh, ready to travel and photograph
across each of seven dark continents.

Elizabeth “Tex” Williams
Black Photographer
1924 -

*I married the military at twenty
and never divorced. I shot
thousands – millions – of soldiers,
finally learning the right lightings,
the right timings, to prevent overexposure
of even the most ghost-like faces. I
preserved forever the soon-to-be-dead.*

My first lover said I was gray in bed.
My second lover said I was dangerously unfocused
I pretended both times not to know what was meant.

My first lover had long white hair.
My second lover had a bald black head.
They were married, to each other.

They gave me their Japanese camera.
It was a present; they hardly ever used it.
If it was payment, I still would have taken it.

The first photograph I took was myself:
I was a shadow, the camera was a flash
that burned a white hole in the mirror
where my face would have been.

Berenice Abbott
White Photographer
1898 -

*Every age is dangerous for a woman:
the Age of Science, the Age of Reason,
the age of 23 when I escaped to Paris
to sculpt, but found strength instead
in the sharp subjects of women. Black
and white always; color only crowds
a photograph, like a man in an artist's life.*

I want to marry a photograph
of my mother when she was my age. Her white
collar is starched skyward, like a supplicant
to some unnamed goddess of toughness.
I want to go to school, to the city, to somewhere
where I can preserve the sleek survivals
of women on high contrast paper.
I want to be a photographer.
But once among the gray buildings, I find success
on the wrong side of the mirror. I am a model:
the exotic, the object, the lie instead of the liar.
My mother sends back the money I send her, hissing
“slut.” I purchase expensively new equipment.

Dora Miller
Black Photographer
1918 - 1951

*Even my mother was excited by the scholarship,
impressed by the lettering on the vellum envelope:
The California Institute of Photography.
Nothing is free. I had to model, to answer phones
in the damned charm school. Still, I learned enough
to open my own studio in L.A., but not enough
to avoid a hard marriage, an early heart attack.*

Like a marriage bed with running water,
like a passionate lover who is always at home,
my darkroom comforts. Pity my life
does not possess a safelight and a triple
goddess of plastic trays and
neatly labeled bottles of fixer
eager to stabilize every negative.
I want the ability to crop and dodge
my days, to increase the exposure time
of my stop-bath nights. My only weather
would be cool tones or warm ones.
I would choose my contrasts:
a whiter white, a bluer black.

Billie Louise Barbour Davis
Black Photographer
1906 - 1955

*Before I was married I danced, but
now I leap in the laundry room. I lined
the windows with blackout shades from the War.
It was easy to do, almost as easy as shooting
the Virginia skies, cloudless with drought.
I huddle inside, manipulate the light,
execute prints which are exotically crisp.*

It is my aunt who calls her whore-niece back
to the Florida hospital where my mother's body
bruises the over-bleached sheets. The White doctor
informs me there are 63 tests for the head.
The technician administers the EEG, explaining
it is like "little pictures of the brain,"
as she pastes pieces of cotton into my mother's hair.
Although the tiny cameras are held by my mother,
she is not the photographer,
but a photograph labeled "Pickaninny, 1935, Mississippi."
The technician switches on the strobe.
My mother is overexposed.
White light flashes where her brain should be.

Margaret Bourke-White
White Photographer
1904 - 1971

*Black and white is the technique of reality.
I learned this in the thirties
as I photographed the Black Florida
sharecroppers, against their newspaper wallpaper, for
the book I was doing with my soon-to-be-second husband.
Later, they would say I lacked subtlety.
Later, they would send me to South Africa for LIFE.*

It is a small exhibit of huge photographs, my first.
There is a polite white wine with a California label.
My lover of the moment has refused to come,
protesting that my work is too dark, as in “depressing.”
My mother is a thousand miles elsewhere, dying.
My favorite print is 20 by 24 inches, with successfully
imperceptible graininess. Three Seminole daughters,
posed on the Everglades Reservation, in front of their mother’s
government home. There is a triple window with black shutters
to their right, as partially focused as a childhood dream,
a sharp triangle of roof overhead.
No one buys this photograph.
Or any other.

Laura Gilpin
White Photographer
1891 - 1979

*I wanted to know the Navajo I photographed
almost as well as I knew my Betsey, my
"companion of fifty years" as her newspaper obituary
labeled her. I never burned in the background sky,
cloudless or otherwise. I always waited
in the desert for the right weather. I never
wanted to work for LIFE, only to live.*

I was a girl here, in this thin white house facing
the cemetery where my mother is being buried.
I learned my first shapes by tracing the headstones,
etched with names because of white powders or black metals
or lack of love. I learned life
was an image to be captured: transitory, tenuous.
I learned death was transparent. I vowed to be unmarried.
Today, I sit in the single window photographing
my mother's mourners: White, Black, and my own
grainy shade of gray. I cannot read the light
meter. Every exposure is wrong. When I develop,
I will burn in the faces, burn in a background.

The Animus of Diane Arbus, the Photographer

I've always been afraid of everything
Human. I was schooled in rooms with
Heavy drapes and taught that civilization
Insisted I ignore my cousin's prominent
Harelip. But I secretly studied it for
Hours, and learned that being polite
Is the ultimate savagery. I made collages
Of orifices that refused to be perfectly
Round. It was easy to let my eyes do
All my thinking; easier still to
Hide behind the three cameras I began to
Wear like gaudy necklaces. My goal was to make
Emotion one-dimensional. I photographed
What other people called freaks, but these
Were people I entertained, men and women
Worth at least one afternoon of dangerous
Sex. I wanted to develop the fear
Of the flesh. But I never thought
Anything was ugly – or beautiful –
Only that experience which teetered on the
Edge of consciousness seemed the most
Authentic. There is a thin lip
Around even the most gentle abyss
Of the soul. I circled and slid toward
Suicide, because all else is
Ambiguity, the cruelest focus of all.

**Käthe Kollwitz, Graphic Artist, Sketches
A German Working-Class Woman**

the distance between us is a piece of bread,
black and thick crusted. we both stand
on long lines, but i can pay you to stand
naked in my studio, pay you to stand
holding a child that is not yours. his
head is a pea in the giant pod of your hands.
i linger with charcoal, studying
the bulk of your fingers. i want
to etch each one with such concentration
that you will be mistaken
for a lithograph. i've always loved
hands. i've always loved
the hands of women. i've always loved
women. these are the reasons i married
a physician. and why did you marry
a worker in tortoise shell? and why
does he drink? i want to make you
beautiful. most of my subjects
are mothers and children of the fatherland.
do you believe i am asked why my art
is so tragic? but i want to make you
different. i have dreams
of week old babies. i have dreams
of you as a delicate hoofed animal
dancing in a forest. i have dreams
of innocence. i want to make you
a curve commanding space, a creature
that does not need to eat. wait,
why does your face twist as if you're
insulted? please understand, i'm weary
of my woodcuts of poverty, of struggle,
of hunger. another life, i would
have devoted myself solely to my hands,
sculpting the sweet earth into vessels.
but the death of children and women
demands sharper instruments. come, hold
me in your huge hands like you hold
that borrowed infant. wait, let me hold
you like a tree in the dead dead winter
can hold both roots and sky.

Regine's Rebuke to Kierkegaard

The years
flew by like magpies trailing bright
ribbons through the twilight. I
have fourteen sons. Not even one is
named Soren. Their eyelashes curl
dark and thick as the tails of Danish ducks
in winter. Some of my boys have handsome
fathers. Do not worry, my jejune darling, you
are not being charged with paternity.

The nights
I seduced you under my red coverlets
produced nothing; only your extravagant
guilt about acquiring a few basic skills.
It was distressingly easy to feign innocence.
The blood was a chicken's. I would blow
out the flickering romance of the candle and laugh
at you under my breath. Afterwards,
you would beseech God with your boring sins.

The morning
you decided you were too god-like to marry,
we sat on a hill round as my breast. The park
was fertile with spring and made me think
of all the places you had never kissed.
At that moment, you were more serious, more
tormented, more interestingly blond, than anyone
I ever knew, but your words were dishonest as parrots
caged as pets. I stilled the wings of my banter.

The day
you first touched me, you had taken me to
a museum in the city. One of us was explaining
the paintings of dead men, while the other choked
on the stale air. The halls were narrow as children's
coffins. As your fingers traced the braid round
the nape of my neck, I lifted my skirt to avoid
the curse of lust in a public place. Even then,
you did not guess I wore the feathers of a gypsy.

The future
you envisioned for me was bleak, but less

so than yours. Without crystal or leaves,
you foresaw my fatal flaw: the capacity to be happy.
You wasted your wind berating me. You
were fearful and trembling and sicker than death.

Your tragedy
was that you deflected your agony with eloquent
edifices, built to explain why you gave me up
when I was never yours to give.

My tragedy
was that your buildings were so expertly
mirrored, my messages died on carrier pigeons
crashing into images of boundless sky.

**Mary Cassatt, After Destroying
the Letters of Edward Degas**

I didn't burn them and they weren't about love.
You can think what you want. I want
you to. Imagination is a caress. Imagine

my portrait of him. I destroyed that too.
Not because he was the only man I ever
painted, except for my father and brothers,

but because I was giving up men
as subjects. I could never get them to touch
without blurring. His dancers weren't like women

I've known. He refused to connect them, to let
them look at each other. He called it control.
Even his whores were solitary, madonnas

out making a living while someone else
cuddled their children. I am interested
in something different. I love colors

like goddesses. Each one must be honored
and a place set for her at the christening
of each canvas, even if she chooses

not to attend; especially then. I love form
like the shifting earth: its lap, its curves,
its familiar kiss. He wrote about my body

calling it maternal, ultimately feminine.
He wrote that my works were substitutes
for the babies I deserved to have. He lacked

imagination. I never craved motherhood, virgin
or otherwise. I always imagined myself
as the infant in my pictures, the girl-christ, the

cherub. When there was no child but a lone
woman at her desk, I imagined myself
as the beloved letter for which she licked

the ugly tasting envelope. The answer,

in a masculine slant of unjoined figures,
had words so bland they tore themselves

to shreds in boredom. Imagine
that. No flames. No passion. Only
the drypoint of a newborn's cry.

**Edith Lewis Comforts Willa Cather
as They Spend a Night
Lost in the Mesa Verde Canyons of Colorado**

We are not lost. As a child, I was
lost often, by which I meant separated
from my mother. She dropped my hand to wander
in the dry goods store, where majestic bolts
of fabric loomed as high as pastel cliffs,
blocking the sun of the one I loved;
the one who did not love me, enough.

In this stone womb, twilight is as long as birth.
The moon rises yellow and round
with my vow: I will love you for the rest
of our lives, even if we survive
this night; even if we survive the next forty years.
You will forget Isabelle, forget Louise.
You will love me enough.

You will write of tonight on the mesa:
it was possession.
And yes, we are possessed, unborn, children
as pure as the silver whispers in the sky.
We can never be lost if we are together.
We are love. The world is our store.
Take my hand. Kiss the silence.

Another Version of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*

before her:

my voice is slit in two; the whispering
girl at home, silent almost / the whispering
woman who is answered by another whispering woman.
the question is California. there are only men
left in my family. and even the lesbians
are getting married. i learn to speak of Paris.

during her:

my voice is one half of two voices
fused as one. it is not only that we
can imitate each other perfectly
with the practice of years, decades, of hearing
one another hiking on that path
from outer ear to inner,
incessant repetition,
making it hard to remember what comes from outside
and what does not.
no, it is not only that.
it is that we have only one voice; one voice in the plural.

after her:

my voice is many voices. an echo.
low and raspy. knives thrown against canyons
with the lonely scrape of metal on stone.
grief did not silence me because i had to speak
for her.
but never for the one i would have been without.

time, place, desire

the claustrophobic greens of late July
afternoons
as dark as dusk
last December, driving
across the nascent mountain ranges
plowed solid on the Cross Bronx Expressway
winter is an incessant memory
a song through the static of the car radio
the echoing voice of a woman
who just must be a dyke
winter is a frozen place
a formless knowledge
informing even the dawning of August

snow is a closet
cold as Colorado, that March, watching
her buying apples, lettuce seeds, an ax
i am innocent, visiting, i want
to tell her, i want
to ask her how she lives
in a state that hates her, i want her
she smiles like i just must be a dyke
nervous in Aspen, the ax
looks relaxed in her hand, shining like a silver necklace
after this last cup of latte together, i'm definitely catching
the bus, connecting in Denver
going home, toward summer, my lover

each season insinuates the others
every place breathes deep its comparisons
if i bury the bearded iris bulbs this autumn
they will bloom this spring
not as beautiful as California
but not as bald as those forced stems
in Provincetown, that white October
when she thought she just must be a dyke
but wasn't
by November
the rock garden frosted, i stayed until the season started
licking the shells of sea animals
souvenirs, repressed in the folds of my body

lust is a map and a calendar, i only want
to wander
and nest, simultaneously
i stuff my Swiss army knife into my knapsack and plant
shade-loving perennials, i polish
the chrome of my motorcycle and paper
the walls with designs for root cellars
my girlfriend says i'm schizophrenic
every Sunday
the librarian (she just must be a dyke)
inspects my selections:
A New England Gardener's Year
Handbook of Exotic Adventures

mint is frightening, it sprawls rudely in June
Hawaii is threatened by typhoons in September
i could infuse oil with basil and a hint of chives
i could visit Funafuti and dive the Dateline
straddle today and tomorrow like a native
but there is Monday morning, my job, its benefits
if you just must be a dyke, my first lover
advised: fall in love with your own survival
she did clip my nails, but not my desire
i still want
to be every woman
i ever wanted, even for a moment,
the one of us enduring everywhere

the last decade of patriarchy

1.
our old wounds got older
and less lonely our fantasies fled our heads
to become schemes we swirled
like a dangerous coffee of safety

2.
a damp morning in any city
what a young woman sees is an old lady sleeping
on the street a random newspaper page
blows across the banged blue leg
the word *post-feminist* justifies its own column

heading other words
career motherhood having it all
the arrival of equality reverse
discrimination the wind still blows
the old woman could not read such words
even if her eyes were not swollen shut with cold

3.
there are conversations in restaurants:
“i no longer long to be chic;
even my boots are last year’s color.”
“i’m too old to be called a chick;
it wounds my fragile psyche.”

the two women did not kiss then
but they would

they would think that kiss was enough
for a small revolution

they would learn how much more was required

4.
we don’t want lifestyles
we want our lives

in this world, every woman is homeless

take back the night

reproductive rights for all women

all those words on our banners
in calligraphy, embroidery, blood and old stockings

we were marching
again and again and again
there was publicity
but it wasn't for us

5.
it had been ten years since i was married
but there were no anniversaries
no roses, no child support, no dinners
unless i made them

i was blue tired of the fumes of the factory
my mother died of cancer
no one to watch the kids during the day
at least at night they sometimes slept

you think prostitution isn't a solution?
all remedies are partial
in this god-forsaken world

6.
religiously, on sunday mornings
he fetches *The New York Times* and espresso
i pull out the magazine first
: another article on illiteracy
: an advertisement for effective resumes
: a photo-spread on Caribbean colors for livable living rooms

then we make love
he is gentle
i am not

i want to wound
i want to be lonelier than lonely

i have my fantasies: personal solutions
are political ones no one
lives on the other side of my windows

7.
even with low heels and dressed in a dark blue success suit
she stumbles
again and again
on that same crumbled curb outside the mirrored building

the dimensions of her office are exactly
the same as those inhabited by men

on her desk is a pile of papers
she has learned to call documents
just as she has learned to call
her job a career
just as she has learned to speak English

to feel lucky
to forget the women walking the streets
the woman sleeping on the street
the wind swirling newspapers across her
the blood crusting almost-blue

8.
we took back the night
every year for years

we reclaimed the moon
even after men had walked there

we had our rituals
we taught them to our children

we loved each other
and our love was a revolution
and our revolution was love

it wasn't enough
it was everything

we grew older and older
there are no words which can remember us

9.
you think to be unnamed
is to be safe?

you think buying coffee
from Nicaragua is brave?

You think your home
is comfortable?

You think there are no wounds
if you can't see them?

You think things are different
now?
yet?

10.
the Goddess, the Goddess, the goddesses
i've read my ninety-ninth book
on pre-patriarchal
it's my last
i've memorized those slashes on their pots
(etched by women)
i've dreamed those womb-like hearths
(shaped by women)

there is still wind and there is still fire
the origins of inventions
no longer concern me

i am writing a book about post-patriarchal culture
can you read it?

i am sipping a cup of mottled coffee
can you join me?

i am living my life as if –

will you?

six celestial paradigms

1.
an ocean splashed with pink the early sunset
a cloud or the idea of a cloud
on the cavewall of the sky painted
as if with the blood of berries and animals as large as Lasaux
by hands going soft with the conceit of reason

this is what we mean when we say philosophy

2.
i like my ceilings white trite as a canvas
i have no imagination or have only that
my face horizontal parallel yellowed b y the luminous light bulb
my hair a collection of brushes tipped with grease
it takes more than talent more than a flare for aesthetics

the pale nucleus of beauty is stained ugly with ambition

3.
to argue the stars into a different arrangement
the dog, a bull the bull, a lion
and the lion an alibi or perhaps entrapment
each pinpoint of light is an unalterable fact
but everything is perspective devoted to a verdict

this is the rule of law the law of rules

4.
Your faith is evidenced in every symmetry
your sun is always perfectly centered in the cyclops sky
your full moons are two half-moons your horizon bisected
drawn and quartered with religious precision
you invented instruments to measure the density of shadows

this is how you designate reality

5.
There have not been stars sighted here (except the hazy sun)

let alone any planets with rings or otherwise
since the great blackout of 1969 (recall riots, the
burst in the birth rate nine months later)
still, the figures for telescope sales are astronomical

figure it out: the body the asteroid of sex

6.

The night is a black velvet cape studded with sequins, with diamonds
with shards of fuselage no no no
the night is the night god damn it
god damn you god damn every last one of them
mutating my damp dark reality into image, into cliché
yes, this is death or success

the last moment of summer

the first red leaf
is unnoticed, deep
in the heart of the forest

a fox—or is a feral dog?—creeps
along the edge
of the receding water

when the doctors tell you that you're dying
you may try
for levity: "isn't everyone?"

the tilt of their heads
the wings of their eyebrows
answer, "ah, you, very soon."

the loon's cry is plaintive
but without pity
echoing low across the salt pond

when they tell you that you will not
survive
time itself is an accomplishment

now it is autumn

April

is national poetry month
I spend it recovering from surgery
accomplishment measured not in metaphor or meter
but in tubes removed from their beds of flesh

At the huge hospital door, I am released
a nonnative butterfly at a spring wedding
the huge world flutters gales against
what I hope will soon be scars

Home, on my porch, I try to read Cavafy,
Piercy, Rich, Rilke, or even Plath,
but the white spaces on the pages
absorb all my diluted attention

So I turn to the catalogs accumulated in my absence
the models mapped with this season's swimsuits
look oddly unfinished—unbisected by incisions
no neat detours around the navel's pothole

My yard seems wide as the Asian Steppes
mother of those wild tulips cultivated by the Dutch
great great grandmother to the single red cup
blooming from a bulb buried by someone I once knew

Someone who could strut, smooth-skinned, in a bikini,
someone whose wings could skirt the sun, someone
who read poems celebrating April's cruelties, believing
herself strong enough to survive them, laughing

perspective

1.
almost blue, the river
at least from a distance

close: hazel
(the color of her eyes after
i no longer loved her)

closer, closer: cupped
in the hand that had once touched
her and drawn to the mouth that
had more than once— :clear

2.
the year we were both dying, the plumber
& i, we continued working
certainly, we needed the money
(hopeless medical procedures are the most expensive)
but we also wanted to belong to the world
and believe that things were fixable
that morning, he came when i called him
(the dying sometimes swear allegiance)
into my bald and scrawny apartment
where my kitchen sink was clogged
nothing as simple as i'd hoped, the elbow
trap, instead, we were at the main drain,
corroded, tumescent, and even leaking,
oh Larry, i asked, is this really very serious?
sweetheart, he said, his face blank as the ceiling
which terminated his gaze, you of all people
should know this: it's only plumbing.

3.
this is the expectation: resolution
deconstructed, we remain reflexive Hegelians
(thesis, antithesis, synthesis)
we want all our images neatly bundled and tied

we crave details that accrete into meaning
we want alms in the form of answers
to questions we believe are begging
who was that woman

with the hazel/not-hazel eyes and why
did we break-up, if we did, and what
was i dying of, if i really was, and if
i was, why am i not dead yet?

or is it all about the river and the drainpipe,
connected through metaphor
or symbol, Lethe or Oshun
or samsara itself?

i can offer no satisfactions, i have nothing
my darling, there are only desires
those exquisite ropes that lash us
to this astonishing raft of life.

water

1.
if my deepest dreams are always water
bluely clear, teasingly salty water,
then i am forever swimming underwater
arms outstretched into the future
palms turned outward, cupped,
arcing back toward my battered body
to move it forward into more water

2.
before i dream, i rock in bed
still feeling the motion of my yellow kayak
the slap
of the bow
as the wave reaches for the stern

the striped bass jump
the river the color of weak tea
the sun behind the clouds
the bridge in the distance
the city farther in the distance

when i paddle i think of my doctors
the ones who said i would die
the ones who saved my life
my strokes are strong
with defiance, with gratitude

3.
sometimes there are simple facts
that startle:

the Inuit kayakers spent weeks at sea
but could not swim

my cancer could recur

i am not dead

4.
the CT machine
like a submarine

with a paradox:
one enters the metal
to let it plumb one's depths

three month check-ups

solstices and equinoxes
find me in the belly of this beast
scanning for my future

5.
i have no desire for ashes to ashes
for dust, for dirt, for the dark dank soil

dying is not romantic

but someday (not soon)
i will be water to water

bury me at sea

poem to be read at my memorial service

If I could, I would thank each of you
for being here, but naming names
could be embarrassing. What if I mentioned you,

who had called me beautiful
when I was gaunt and bald, but you
had decided my former beauty was no match

for your abhorrence of funerals? Or failed to mention you,
there in the far aisle, scribbling in your Filo-Fax
self-satisfied with your juggling of your schedule

to fit me in one last time. And you
hoping Amazing Grace will not be sung and you
hoping it will be, and you

wondering when this charade will be over and you
can go home. I could allude to you
who never called me during my illness or you

who telephoned but asked me only what I wanted to say to you
now that you
were apologizing. Are you still waiting for me to forgive you?

I am not that kind. But I would like to acknowledge you
who lit candles for me, and you
who prayed and offered your type O blood

and you, who gave me a book on dying and healing,
suggesting the chapter: *visualize your
own funeral*. The still-living authors

proclaiming the wonders of writing your
own eulogy, imagining people crying over you,
already missing you! Can I tell you,
tell them, this did not make me happy,
or even resigned. I know you,
you who shared poems and letters with me

are longing for some image
some aesthetic to rescue you
by now any anaesthetic would be welcome to you

all of you, who gave what you
could and took what you
dared and came here today to show yourselves

and each other that you did— you
did—care. I would thank each of you
if I could

but all my gratitude has been cremated
and all that remains is
nothing

nothing of your
petty transgressions, or mine,
nothing

except this horrible fact: you
are alive. And I,
I am

not.

a child's garden of verses

what i wanted was everything in other people's gardens
twirling vines of purple flowers always in bloom
smells that spiraled from the grass sophisticated
like cigarette smoke gathering at my vinyl sandals
like the spring-pink braided garlands in the library book on Heidi
like the double-heart ankle bracelets adorning the whores on the corner
what i wanted was a garden

a space a sanctuary a possibility
among the company of mountain-goat girls and black-eyed women
feeding them the vegetables of my labors tomatoes
as huge as tires red as the freshest stains on the sidewalk
potatoes that grew salted and fried on towering stalks
i would cultivate corn with rainbow-colored kernels beans
that had seeds of butter pumpkins with faces round as babies

i would have fruit trees, too cranberry sauce blueberry pies
oranges that did not need to be peeled nectarines and cherries
with edible pits there would be flowers, naturally
white blossoms of all sizes all breeds
buds folded, roses swimming, water-lilies tiny, soft as moss
i would bring home strays like the striped-lilies
bent, exhausted abandoned near the highways dead by July

what i wanted was a fence low enough to be hugged
far from barbed wire no chains, no locks what i wanted was a
fence wood, not metal i would always keep it painted
bright inviting colors like a trellis laced with morning glories
all day, every day what i wanted was a fence
with a gate that opened and shut
what i wanted was a garden a verse from someone else's childhood

Notes

The biographical information for Elizabeth “Tex” Williams, Dora Miller and Louise Barbour Davis is derived from Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* (Dodd, Mead & Co., 1985). The biographical information for Berenice Abbott is derived from Erla Zwinger, “A Life of Her Own,” in 16 *American Photographer* 54-67 (April 1986). The biographical information for Margaret Bourke-White is from Vicki Goldberg, *Margaret Bourke-White: A Biography* (Harper & Row, 1986). The biographical information for Laura Gilpin is from Martha A. Sandweiss, *Laura Gilpin: An Enduring Grace* (Amon Carter Museum, 1986).

The biographical information in “Käthe Kollwitz, Graphic Artist, Sketches a German Working Class Woman” is derived from Martha Kearns, *Käthe Kollwitz: Women and Artist* (Feminist Press, 1976).

The biographical information in “The Animus of Diane Arbus, Photographer” is derived from Patricia Bosworth, *Diane Arbus: A Biography* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1984).

The quotes from Nicole Brossard and the translations in “nightshade” appear in *Trivia* 13. Some references in Part VI of “nightshade” are to the murder of Rebecca Wight and the attempted murder of Claudia Brenner by Stephen Roy Carr on the Appalachian Trail.